

Collective Mutants 1: Electric Sheep

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[TCP] Collective Mutants.

This is a kind of experiment. A series of Common People stories, focussing on a household of young mutants. I have no idea if this is going to work, but I'll try anyway...

The stories are set in Melbourne, Australia, since that's what I know best. Besides, Kielle mentioned something about seeing stories set in places other than the US...

Disclaimer: The characters are all mine, although the mutant concept belongs to Marvel. The Common People concept is Kielle's (talented little red panda, isn't she?) The places are also real, but some names have been changed to avoid some very nasty lawsuits.

The title is a reference to Phillip K. Dick's book "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?", better known as the movie Bladerunner.

Rating: PG13 for this one. A few swear words.

Feedback: To Rossi@subreality.com Please let me know if I'm wasting my time.

Story One: Electric Sheep.

James Danaher hesitated at the front gate of the house in Hope Street, and checked again the scrap of paper clutched in his sweaty hand. "74 Hope Street, Brunswick", he read, even though the address was by now committed to memory. This was it.

The house was a two storey terrace, identical to the other two houses on either side. Except for one major point: the other terraces (as

well as most of the houses in the street) were painted in heritage colours, the ubiquitous cream-burgundy-forest green combinations. Number 74 was pink. Bright, cheerful, in-your-face pink. 'No wonder Karen said I wouldn't have trouble finding it,' James thought with a small, nervous smile. A row of wind chimes and dream catchers and pieces of coloured glass strung along the narrow verandah on the top floor tinkled softly in the warm afternoon air. Someone had planted sunflowers in the tiny front garden, and they seemed to nod at him in greeting. It was a calm, serene, welcoming scene. Non-threatening. A haven. So why did he hesitate?

James reached out a trembling hand to the wire and wrought metal gate. The movement pulled back his sleeve slightly, exposing a skinny pale arm traced with lines of circuitry. Almost as if sensing the metal beneath his fingers, the electronic pathways crept along his arm to the back of his hand, seeking to meld with the gate.

"Not now," he hissed under his breath, trying to calm himself enough to regain control. "Go away, damn it."

"Can I help you?" asked a girl's voice from behind him. James jumped, snatching his hand away from the gate as if he had been burned.

"Oh! Um, no, I'm fine, I was just... Er, is this... you know?" he stuttered.

"The mutant house?" laughed the girl. She was blond and stockily built, with the kind of deep tan that can only be achieved by those who spend long hours working outside. Amused blue eyes looked at him candidly. "Yep, this is it. You must be the bloke Karen spoke to this morning. She said you might turn up."

"J-james Danaher," he managed. "You live here?"

"Sure do. Allison Ferguson." The girl shifted the string bag over her shoulder. "Well, can't hang around out here all day. Grab those bags for me will you?" She opened the gate and went up the short path to the front steps, pulling some keys out of her pocket. James hurried after, scooping up the plastic shopping bags full of groceries she'd indicated.

"This is it," Allison said, opening the front door on a long narrow hallway. "Excuse the mess. I told Fish I'd leave a snake in his bed if he didn't start picking up after himself, but it looks like he didn't believe me. Silly bastard. I'll have to do it now."

"Fish?" asked James, following Allison up the hall and dodging the roller blades, a sports bag full of sweaty athletic gear, and a pile of old newspapers that was knee high. With the door closed, the hall was dim and cool. Doors punctuated the right hand wall at regular intervals, and half way down was a staircase.

"Raphael Gianmmario. He lives here too. We call him Fish because... well, you'll see why." Allison paused at the stairs. "KAREN! THAT NEW BLOKE IS HERE TO SEE YOU!!"

James shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears. Allison had impressive lung power.

"I'll be down in a minute!" called another female voice- it had to be Karen.

"Kitchen's this way," Allison indicated, continuing down the hall. "There's four of us here: Fish has the front room down here, which is why most of his shit is in the hall, and Karen and I share the main bedroom upstairs. There's two more smaller rooms up there. One's Fatimah's, the other would be yours, if you decide to stay." She pushed open the door at the end of the hall to reveal a surprisingly clean kitchen. James had visited several "student houses", and they were invariably so dirty they could be reclassified toxic waste dumps. Then again, most of James' friends were engineering students, not known for their house pride.

Allison dropped her bag of shopping on the counter with a sigh of relief. "Just dump those there," she told James. "I'll put the kettle on." James did as he was told, or tried to: a thin chain of circuitry had snuck down his arm and was currently invading the plastic of the bag. He struggled with it a minute, cursing under his breath. At last he managed to retract the explorer and looked around to find Allison watching him.

"Does that happen often?" she asked softly. James nodded glumly.

"Quite a lot. Especially if I'm nervous or stressed. It doesn't hurt anything, it just tries to study stuff." James sighed. "Most of the time I can keep it under control, but lately, it's just gone nuts. Must be exams coming up."

"What is it, exactly?" Allison asked, taking a seat at the table and motioning him to sit too.

"Organic circuitry. Basically, it makes me a sort of living computer. When I first started... you know, it covered my entire body. Really freaked out my family. But they got used to it, and so did I. It's mostly on my chest and arms now, but every so often, it gets curious." James pulled back the long sleeves of his shirt to show Allison the interlocking segments and lines of silver and black, spotted here and there with blue and red plastic. "See?"

Even as he spoke, Allison could see the circuitry multiplying, sending questing tendrils along the scarred surface of the table. She looked up at James: a thin, pale, freckled young man- no, boy, her mind amended- his bright red hair unkempt and his glasses smudged. She could see the fear in his grey eyes, almost sense the unspoken thoughts: will she hate me, find me repulsive, call me a monster, reject me? She knew those thoughts, because they had been her own, at one time or another. Still were, sometimes.

"How about a cup of tea, Blue?" she asked him with a smile. She got up and headed for the stove. "Mum says that's the best cure for everything from flystrike to bushfire." James looked confused. "My parents own a sheep farm up in the Western district," she explained. "I'm a country girl, and proud of it."

"So why-?"

"Come down here? Watch." Allison held the kettle on the palm of her left hand, and concentrated. Her hand erupted into flames. "Not

exactly the best power to have in bushfire season," she explained as the kettle heated up. "I sort of lost it at the ANZAC Day show two years ago, nearly burned the town down to the ground. So my parents sent me here, to stay with relatives until the fuss died down and I learned to control it. There's a clinic of sorts that Karen put me onto at the Uni. I'm not a student, but they let me go anyway, thanks to Kaz."

"Taking my name in vain again, Ali?" asked a new voice. The owner appeared at the door, brown eyes twinkling. "Hi. You must be James. I'm Karen. We spoke on the phone." Karen was tall and thin, and moved with an almost eerie grace. She had a red headband on, keeping the dark curly hair out of her eyes, and was wearing loose orange and brown striped cotton pants and an orange tank top that left her muscled brown midriff bare. She had a tattoo of a Dreamtime bird on her stomach.

James stared at her open mouthed, until Allison's snort brought him back to reality.

"Um, yeah, I'm James. I was sort of hoping..."

"That you could stay?" Karen smiled, white teeth dazzling in her brown face. "Well, you've struck it lucky there, mate. Anthony moved out two weeks ago to live with his girlfriend, and we've been looking for someone else ever since." She grinned again. "Provided, of course, that you can stand us."

While Allison busied herself making tea in a cracked brown teapot and putting the shopping away, Karen sat at the table and spoke with James. Her manner was open and caring- without Allison's rough edges- and she listened so intently to what he said James found himself telling her more than he intended. More than he'd ever said to anyone, in fact.

"I've been staying at one of the residential colleges, but I've just got to get out of there," he explained. "Sure they've got a 'tolerance policy'." He made the inverted commas gestures with his thin fingers, caught up in the words, "But just let someone actually come out as a mutant. Then it's snide comments, bad practical jokes and rougher than usual treatment." James sighed and ran a trembling hand through his hair. "Last night three of the guys from the rowing team decided to play a game of 'mutie football'. They were bouncing me off the walls, off themselves... it was really starting to get out of hand. I'm lucky the floor tutor turned up. But this morning the Dean of the college had a little chat, gave me the usual line about being concerned for my safety, how he couldn't protect me there... I think he's just worried about the reputation of the college if word got out the place is full of muties. That's when I called you. Someone at the Student Union gave me your number. I just didn't know what to do."

Allison made a rude noise. Karen reached across the table and gave his hand a squeeze- ignoring the tendrils of circuitry that nudged at her hand.

"Go on," she said. "How did they find out you were a mutant? I'm assuming you didn't tell them before you applied for residence, or you'd never have got in."

"Too bloody right," Allison muttered in agreement.

"Like I was explaining to Allison, things have been getting a bit out of hand with my mutation lately. I think it was the stress of uni, plus hiding what I was. I was having showers at two, three in the morning so no-one would walk in and see. Then one night at dinner, I was on the Dean's table, the usual rah-rah traditional shit, and somehow I got wired to the table. I couldn't stand up. Even after dinner finished and everyone was taking their dishes to the kitchen, I was still sitting there at that damn table. I was still there an hour later."

Despite their best efforts, both Karen and Allison couldn't help the grins, then the giggles. For a fraction of a second, James looked stricken with embarrassment, but their mirth was so infectious- so honest and open- he couldn't help joining in. The giggles grew into laughter, loud and uncontrollable.

"I had the cutlery fused to my hands!" gasped James, "I looked like some budget version of Edward Scissorhands!"

"Ow, stop it, I can't take any more," wheezed Karen, clutching at her sides.

"They called in the porter to pull me off!"

"Oh God, what did you do?" giggled Allison through the hand over her mouth she was trying to muffle the laughter with, unsuccessfully.

"Nothing! They ended up getting a saw and cut the table off!" The three of them collapsed, howling with laughter.

"Um, did I miss something?" came a light high voice from the back door.

"H-hi, Fatimah, we w-were just talk-talking to James here. He needs a place to stay." Karen wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes. Allison, her face an alarming shade of red, hastily disappeared into the room at the other side of the kitchen. From the splashing of water, it had to be a bathroom, James guessed, taking off his glasses and wiping them with his shirt.

"Fatimah Saliba, this is James Danaher. James, Fatimah. We call her the fairy at the bottom of the garden." Karen smiled again. She seemed to do it a lot.

James could see why they called her a fairy. Fatimah was tiny, barely four and a half feet tall, and built as delicately as a bird. Her black hair was tied up in a braid that reached the small of her back, and she had large, almond shaped eyes, also black. But what most earned her the description was the pair of butterfly wings protruding from her shoulder blades. They were fully two feet long, and iridescent with colours, shimmering in the light. She had antennae too, again like a butterfly.

"um, hello," he whispered, awe struck. Karen was attractive, even pretty. But Fatimah was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen.

Fatimah took it in her stride. She seemed used to males becoming dribbling idiots around her.

"Welcome, James," she said, her voice lightly accented. "I hope you find us to be good housemates." She then turned her attention to the fridge, pulling out a large bottle of thick syrupy liquid. The bottle was labelled "Fatimah" in big red letters.

"Glucose syrup," she explained to James as she sat down. She stuck a straw in the stuff and set to work.

"Fatimah's mutation makes her metabolism operate at an accelerated rate," Karen explained. "So she has to refuel on pure glucose every three or four hours."

"More, if I fly," Fatimah added, taking a deep breath after the effort of sucking the syrup through the straw. "It's such a wonderful day, I couldn't resist."

"You went to the Gardens again?" Allison asked, coming out of the bathroom far more composed than when she went in. Fatimah nodded.

"Be careful, you know it's not safe. Remember what happened last time," Karen warned. Fatimah made a face, and stood.

"I've got to go to work soon, I'd better get ready. James, it was nice meeting you. I look forward to having you around." Light as a feather, Fatimah half-flew, half-skipped down the hall.

Karen and Allison exchanged worried glances. "Twit," Allison grumbled, "She'll get herself lynched one day."

"I suppose after what her father did to her, nothing holds any fear for her," Karen mused. Then she seemed to remember James, sitting there awkwardly listening to what was obviously private business. "So, do you want to stay for dinner? You can meet Fish that way."

"I'll call you tomorrow morning, let you know, okay?" Karen called as James walked down the street towards Sydney Road and a tram back to college. He waved, and the three at the gate- Karen, Allison and the tall athletic "Fish"- waved back.

"So, call a house meeting?" Allison asked. Karen shrugged.

"That means we'd have to wait 'til Fatimah's shift finishes. She's already said yes, so I think we can go ahead without her."

"I say yes too," Allison said immediately. Fish nudged her with his elbow.

"Another stray for your collection?" he teased. Allison pulled a face at him.

"I like him. He's quiet, but there's some very interesting stuff under the surface," Karen said quietly. Around her, the deepening shadows were flickering and moving, crowding together to form

silhouettes- animals, birds, people. The other two didn't comment: they were long used to Karen's shadow manipulation.

"Yeah, he's all right, for a computer geek," Fish declared, "Count him in. Now I'd better go study. I've got an Anatomy prac first thing tomorrow."

"If you spent less time at the gym, you'd wouldn't have to swot half the night away," Allison lectured as the pair went up the front steps. Karen stayed behind, gazing up at the stars that were unusually bright in the clear summer evening. Under her breath she sang one of the Old songs her Teacher had taught her, and around her, the shadows danced.

James sat on the tram, letting the subtle rocking motion soothe him. He'd had a good evening, met some people he really liked, and had a very good meal. Allison, it appeared, was the home maker of the group, running things with practical efficiency. In return, she paid only bills and food kitty, a fair trade considering the amount of work she did. Karen explained the situation to James whilst Allison was in the back yard, cutting some fresh herbs from the tiny garden.

"See, Allison's parents sent her down here to stay with relatives, but they didn't get along."

"They didn't like mutants?" James had asked.

"No, that didn't really bother them. They just didn't like Allison that much. Too much of a country girl, too sensible and practical. Not girly enough. She had a huge barney with them and got tossed out on her ear. We'd already met through her cousin- he was in my Politics class and told me about his mutant cousin- so I offered her a room here. She didn't have much money, but she's very proud, so she became the housekeeper, sort of. She gets chronically homesick sometimes, but she doesn't want to get her family into trouble, so she stays away."

"That really sucks. I'd hate it if I couldn't see my folks."

Karen had given him an odd look. "Well, let's just say not all families are like on TV."

James thought about that now as he fought sleep. The last thing he wanted was to fall asleep on the tram and end up in the city. He hoped they would ask him to stay: he really liked Allison and Karen, and Fatimah and Fish had seemed nice enough, although Fish made him nervous. He was one of those arch-typical blokes: a sportsman, a party animal, and a joker. Amazingly, considering how much time he seemed to spend drunk according to his own stories, Fish was studying Medicine, and doing quite well. Allison had told him as he helped her set the table that it was because he never seemed to go to sleep.

"Is that his power?" James had asked, curious.

"No, he's amphibian. Have a look at his hands at dinner."

Sure enough, when the tall sandy-haired athlete shook hands with him as they were introduced, James noticed the webbing between his fingers. "Feet, too," Fish had said, when he noticed James looking at his hands. "And gills. I can swim like the clappers."

"Which is precisely why they won't let you do triathlons any more," Allison had remarked. "Unfair advantage in the water."

"And a disadvantage in the running stage, don't forget!" Fish had protested. "The only way I could keep running on a hot day was if I had someone splashing water on me every five minutes!"

"Stick to the road racing: you're a better cyclist than a runner anyway," Karen had interjected. James had enjoyed seeing the three of them interacting together, discerning their roles in the house. Allison was the practical one, the voice of reason when the others got carried away with things. Karen was the peacemaker, the negotiator. Fish was comedian, the one who stopped things getting too serious. And Fatimah? He'd seen so little of her, he wasn't sure. She was the enigma.

And where would he fit in ?

"Hey, Mutie!" A heavy hand thumped on the door of the broom cupboard he called a room. "Phone for you!"

James groaned and crawled out of bed. He'd spent half the night cleaning porridge out of his bed and off the floor- a present from his not-so-friendly neighbours. The other half had been spent worrying about Karen's call. If they didn't want him, he would go insane here for sure.

"H-hello?" he said groggily, standing in the hall in his Cartman boxers and "They Might Be Giants" T-shirt. Patterns of circuitry ran down his legs and arms, creeping up his neck. He ignored the stares he was getting from the other students passing him in the hall, scratching at a loose microchip just below his ear.

"James? It's Karen. You're in. When can you move in?"

"Um, today, I suppose. Or is that too soon?"

"No, no problem. Fish can borrow his Dad's station wagon, pick you and your stuff up this afternoon after class, if you like." Karen's voice was warm, "Welcome to the insanity, Jim."

By evening, James was installed in the small room at the back of the house on the upper storey. It wasn't much, but it was bigger than his college room (by about twenty centimetres) and it didn't have the added bonus of neighbours who would stand in a line down the hallway and swat you with rolled up newspapers when you headed down for breakfast. As soon as he had finished making arrangements with Karen, he had called his parents to tell them.

"But James, I don't see why you can't come back home," his mother had said.

"Mum, Rosanna is two hour's commute to uni and back every day. I'd never get any work done!" 'Besides,' he'd mentally added, 'You'll smother me to death. I have to get out on my own.'

Eventually his mother seemed to accept the idea, although she remained worried: "They are _nice_ people, aren't they? They don't take drugs, do they dear?"

"No, Mum. One can make her hands catch fire, one's a human butterfly, and another is part fish. I still don't know what Karen can do. But no, they don't take drugs." 'That I know of.'

His father, as always, had been quietly supportive. "I'll sort out things with the college, and your rent money. Let me know if you need anything, son," was all he'd said. Typical Dad. Never one to waste words.

He sat on the saggy bed (left by a previous tenant), and looked around the room with quiet satisfaction. It was his room, and he was safe.

As he was putting some posters up on the wall by the window, he noticed Allison sitting alone in the garden. No, not sitting, huddling. She was rocking back and forth and James could hear muffled sobs. Instinctively, he leant out the open window to say something, but another instinct told him Allison would not appreciate the interruption, so he pulled his head back in. He remembered what Karen had said about her bouts of homesickness. This was obviously one of them. Maybe there was something else he could do. He dived for one of his boxes, the one labelled "Bits", and set to work...

"Um, Allison?" She was standing at the kitchen sink, peeling potatoes. When she turned, her eyes and nose were puffy and red.

"Oh, it's you, Blue," she said wanly, "How are things? Settled in?"

"I've still got boxes everywhere, but I'll get to them. I just wanted to give you this." He held out a small newspaper-wrapped package.

"Me? Why?" Allison asked cautiously, wiping her hands on the apron she wore. It was a tea-towel that had had tapes attached to tie it on. It proclaimed in big letters: "New Zealand: the Land of the Long White Sheep."

"Because you were so nice to me, at the gate yesterday. I was ready to bolt, before you turned up."

"I thought it was because you were stuck to the gate that stopped you," Allison chuckled, taking the small parcel and unwrapping it. It was quite heavy, and felt hard and soft at the same time. "What

the-?" She turned the object over in her hands, wonderingly. Then she laughed.

"A little robotic sheep, how clever! Do you make this, Blue?" James nodded, bursting with pride. "You even used a scourer for the wool!" She patted the springy coils of stainless steel.

"Here, let me show you how it works." He took the little construction out of Allison's hands, and set it on the table. "The switch is here, and it runs off a couple of double A batteries," he explained, flipping the tiny switch on its underside. The small robot walked forward a few steps, looked around, and then "Baa-ed". Then it did it again. Allison burst out laughing, and then gave James a hug that nearly smothered him.

"It responds to voices to, watch," James wheezed. "Here, sheep!" Obediently, the sheep changed directions.

"Let me try!" exclaimed Allison, "Over here, Lambert!" Again, the sheep turned and headed towards her. "That's just absolutely amazing, James." James shrugged modestly.

"Part of my powers. I make gadgets. I can talk to computers and stuff too, so if anything breaks down, let me know, and I'll give it a good talking-to." He turned to go back up the hall. "I'd better go and finish unpacking." Allison, entranced by her electronic pet, nodded. James got almost to the stairs when she called to him.

"Hey, Blue?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks. I mean it. This is- you can't know what this means to me." James smiled.

"Oh, I think I can."

The End.

Glossary of Australian terms:

ANZAC Day: sort of like Veteran's Day. Commemorates the landing of Australian soldiers at Gallipoli in WWI.

The Gardens: Short for Botanical Gardens. Big green space in the middle of the city.

Blue/Bluey: the nickname given to red-heads. More of a country thing these days...

Barney: no, not that Barney. Another word for fight.

That's all I can think of right now. Feel free to ask if something doesn't make sense.

End
file.